

LATINA ENGINEER LEADING THE WAY

BY DAVID FAURIA

From a young age, Diana Gomez always tried to figure out how things worked. Growing up in Parlier, California, a small farming community, Diana was an ever-inquisitive child. She would take apart old radios, appliances; anything she could get her hands on. Now, the highest-ranking Latina engineer in the State of California has made one of the missions of her life to deconstruct her own success and replicate it in her community.

Diana's love of engineering began in the 7th grade. Her class had a guest speaker – Linda Van Kirk, of Pacific Bell. In the presentation, Ms. Van Kirk showed students how the intricate wiring inside a telephone made a voice at one end travel through the phone, across telephone wires, where it could instantaneously be heard hundreds of miles away. Over the course of that hour, a spark found tinder in the young Diana Gomez's mind. "It doesn't take much to spark a little flame inside a student and open up their imagination," Diana recalls. That spark turned into a flame when Diana got to high school. She excelled in math and science, and at the urging of her high school counselor Magdalena Vasquez, enrolled at Fresno State University as an electrical engineering major.

In a field not traditionally dominated by Latinas, Diana had to work hard to "prove" herself. She found overwhelming support from an association called the Society for Hispanic



Photos provided by Diana Gomez

Professional Engineers (SHPE). SHPE was founded in 1974 in Los Angeles with the goal of supporting engineers in the Hispanic Community. Diana served as the President of the Student Chapter at Fresno State, President of the Professional Chapter after graduation, later the Regional Vice President, and eventually SHPE's only three-time National President.

In her time as National President of SHPE, she did what she does best – figuring out what makes things work. In this case, Diana helped guide and shape programs that would specifically target young people, especially Latinas. Under her guidance, SHPE sought to create a "pipeline" of the next generation of Hispanic engineers. In Diana's view the organization had to address three critical needs: transforming the way K-12 education presents math and science; assisting Hispanic students enrolled at universities; and once in the professional realm, helping young professionals network and grow their skills. Among the most challenging of those endeavors, was finding a way to make math and science more accessible to Latinas.

Math and science have inherently difficult concepts for young people. However, practical demonstrations, like the one from Ms. Van Kirk, transform the sciences into something tangible. Diana spends what little is left of her free time away from her office at school campuses – seeking to make these disciplines more palpable to students. Programs like these are one of the great successes of her leadership at SHPE.

Young Latinas who wish to pursue a career in engineering face other unique challenges as well, such as entering a field traditionally dominated by males. Diana has sought to find ways to demonstrate to young Latinas that not only can they be successful in the field, but the diversity they bring can enhance projects and lead to new ways of thinking about complex problems. Because of the scope of challenges inherent in engineering, Latinas often bring a rich background that is different from "everyone else" in the room. Those different perspectives allow "lots of ideas" and bring about "lots of different solutions."

Diana also sees her role as one that comes with great responsibility. She is a role model to young women and knows the great power that comes with it. Just as a female engineer walked into her middle school classroom and ignited a spark in her – Diana knows that she now has the ability to do that for the next generation of female engineers. She also understands that as a true groundbreaker, she has the ability to shatter stereotypes. Diana understands that often times she has to work harder and be a step ahead, and has used that motivation to propel herself to fantastic achievements and great success.

In every step along Diana's career, she has faced obstacles and always met them with success. She has been named one of the "100 Most Influential Hispanics" by *Hispanic*

Business, one of the "Top 100 Hispanics in the Teaching Field" by *Hispanic Engineer*, and recently awarded the "Jaime Oaxaca" award – the highest national honor given by SHPE for outstanding contributions in the field of engineering and science in the Hispanic community. Diana has since stepped down from her position as National



Latina Luncheon at the SHPE National Conference in Washington DC

President of SHPE to focus her energy on California's High Speed Rail Project, but is still actively involved in the Society. Prior to working on the High Speed Rail Project, Diana served as the deputy director for Los Angeles and Ventura County for CalTrans.

In her new position as the Regional Director for the California High-Speed Rail Authority, she uses her unique perspective to craft and shape policies that seek to find the best solutions to multifaceted problems; while at the same time remaining compassionate to the needs of all of the stakeholders involved. She tries to lead from a place of both humility and compassion – two traits acquired from her unique background working alongside her grandfather as a young girl. While the complexity of the High-Speed Rail Project is great, there is no doubt that Diana will do what she always does – figure out the best way to make it work. ■